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ABSTRACT

A study was done which examined one college search committee's criteria for an entry level faculty position and the characteristics of applicants to that position. The position, assistant professor of education, was advertized in the "Chronicle of Higher Education" and included nine criteria. Of the 41 applicants only one-third presented credentials in content and format that encouraged serious search committee consideration. Lack of documented expertise in the advertised area of specialization eliminated over half of the applicants from further scrutiny. Additionally, applicants that met less than half of the advertised criteria were also eliminated from the candidate pool. After this initial screening, applicants' potential for prestige (published research) and previous experience in graduate and undergraduate teaching weighed heavily in selecting candidates to be interviewed. The three candidates selected for interviews marketed themselves well: qualifications for the position were specifically and clearly articulated in the cover letter, vitae, and personalized letters of recommendation. Included are recommendations gleaned from the study including suggesting that candidates apply for positions in which they meet at least half of the criteria requested, demonstrate expertise in the area of concentration, provide good cover letters and recommendations, and offer a professional presentation of credentials. Seventeen references are included. (JB)

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Evaluation of Applicants for Employment in Higher Education: A Search Committee's Screening and Selection Criteria

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Evaluation of Applicants for Employment in Higher Education: A Search Committee's Screening and Selection Criteria

ABSTRACT

The results of a search committee screening to hire new faculty for an entry level tenure track position found that only one-third of the 41 applicants presented credentials in content and format that encouraged serious search committee consideration. Lack of documented expertise in the advertised area of specialization eliminated over half of the applicants from further scrutiny. Additionally, applicants that met less than half of the advertised criteria were also eliminated from the candidate pool. After this initial screening, applicants' potential for prestige (published research) and graduate and undergraduate teaching experiences weighed heavily in selecting candidates to be interviewed. The three candidates selected for interviews marketed themselves superbly: qualifications for the position were specifically and clearly articulated in the cover letter, vitae, and personalized letters of recommendation. Recommendations for candidates applying for entry level faculty positions are suggested.

Evaluation of Applicants for Employment in Higher Education: A Search Committee Member's Experiences and Recommendations

Mary R. Sudzina
The University of Dayton

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to serve on a departmental search committee to screen and recommend candidates for an entry-level assistant professor position at a private midwestern university. The three other search committee members were tenured and had previously served on numerous such search committees; I was recently hired and this was my inaugural committee assignment. I looked forward to the task with anticipation and curiosity as my qualifications had been similarly weighed and scrutinized by a similar committee the previous year.

Forty-one applicants responded to an advertisement for the position in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The range of submissions varied enormously with fewer than one-third of the applicants meeting two-thirds of the advertised criteria. This was puzzling considering that these were highly educated and talented individuals responding to a specific set of qualifications. Why did so few clearly meet much of the criteria? Were the screening and criteria too rigorous? Were they simply unqualified or applying out of their area of expertise? Were some candidates simply unaware of how best to market themselves for this position?

Using my own experiences as a guide, I assumed that these faculty aspirants would be operating from a similar set of assumptions about the hiring process, especially in regard to documenting and presenting their qualifications for the position. I had assumed that applicants would compose a succinct cover letter in which their qualifications for the position would be specifically outlined to correspond to the qualifications listed in the advertisement. I had expected that fresh letters of recommendation would be sent to support an applicant's candidacy for this particular position. I had expected that applicants would apply only for positions in their areas of expertise or closely allied fields.

Additionally, I thought that applicants would be knowledgeable about and/or sensitive to the institutional culture of the university before outlining **their** needs to the search committee

The goals of this study were twofold: First, to assist future search committees in their candidate selection processes by looking at the criteria and screening processes of one search committee; and, second, to provide directions and recommendations for prospective candidates vying for advertised entry level faculty positions.

A recent review of the literature found few current references to academic hiring practices, and none addressed differences among candidates in the selection process. Most articles lacked an empirical base. They either advised fledgling teachers (Dewey & Gardner, 1983; Kopetskie, 1983; Jarchow, 1981) or surveyed department chairs, search committee members and newly hired faculty on what they thought were the characteristics of successful applicants in higher education (Klesges, Sanchez, & Stanton, 1982; Klugh, 1964; McDowell & Mrozla, 1987; Rand & Ellsworth, 1979). Both Perlman (1976 and Shetty (1988) wrote about the job hunt from personal and vastly different experiences as new Ph.D.'s in psychology and economics, respectively. Wilbur (188) wrote of the importance of having a mentor and publishing at the pre-Ph.D. level.

Several themes emerged from a review of the literature: Competition for academic positions is keen and position openings have not kept up with demand (Klesges et al, 1982; Klugh, 1964; Perlman, 1976; Rand & Ellsworth, 1979; Shetty, 1988; Wilbur, 1988); candidates should apply only for positions for which they qualify (Klesges et al, 1982); the letter of application, resume, and letters of recommendation can be an invitation for further inquiry or a source of immediate rejection (McDowell & Mrozla, 1987; Perlman, 1976; Rand & Ellsworth, 1979; Shetty, 1988; Wilbur, 1988). Teaching mattered (Rand & Ellsworth, 1978) and prestige or the promise of prestige (i.e. publications) was very important (Klesges et al, 1982; Klugh, 1964; McDowell & Mrozla 1987; Rand & Ellsworth 1979; Wilbur, 1988). Furthermore, successful candidates competed successfully at several different levels (Shetty, 1988; Wilbur,

1988) and at several different times during the selection process (Carlsen & Sudzina, 1989). Communication skills, one's knowledge of subject area, the potential for conducting research and an ability to fill departmental or institution needs distinguished new faculty hires (Klesges et al, 1982; McDowell & Mrozla, 1987; Rand & Ellsworth, 1979).

In essence, the literature review offers very little direction or consistent information on how to successfully conduct the academic job search in higher education, either for the search committee or the prospective candidate. Much of the information is anecdotal, ex post facto, or cannibalized from areas such as business or the liberal arts. For example, advice on resume writing suggests that candidates take a Spartan approach to presenting their vitae and to highlight the salient points in one or two pages. This may be sage advice for entry level positions in business or technological fields, but would not be satisfactory in applying for an a position in higher education where a complete accounting of ones work experiences and qualifications appears to be *de rigor.* Academic degrees and certifications, presentations, publications, and employment history may be necessary to determine the depth and breadth of a candidate's qualifications.

Methods

Forty-one candidates responded to an announcement in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (see Table 1).

Table 1

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION

Secondary Education - Candidates should hold an earned doctorate in education with a strong background in curriculum development and secondary education. Three years experience in elementary and/or secondary schools and oral proficiency in English language are required. Responsibilities will include teaching methods and foundations courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Candidates should be committed to conducting research as well as to teaching.

Appointment and Salary - Tenure track, nine month appointment, possibility of additional summer teaching, competitive salary.

Application procedures - Applicants should address inquires or forward letter of application, curriculum vitae, and a minimum of three current letters of recommendation to:

Chair, Department of Teacher Education

Measures

Nine criteria were deduced from the advertisement by the Search Committee Chair. They were:

1. Earned doctorate in education
2. Strong background in curriculum development
3. Three years experience in elementary and/or secondary schools.
4. Oral proficiency in English language
5. Commitment to conducting research
6. Commitment to teaching
7. Undergraduate teaching experience
8. Graduate teaching experience
9. Positive relationship with college students

Candidates received a "1" if they fulfilled advertised criteria, ".5" if they partially fulfilled criteria and "0" if requested information or experiences were missing. A perfect score to fulfill search committee criteria would have been a "9". Criteria ratings were cumulative rather than qualitative. No effort was made to rank criteria in order of importance.

Procedures and Analysis

Candidate application files (letters of application, vitae, and letters of recommendation) were reviewed and ranked on the strength of submitted documentation on each of the nine advertised criteria. This was done independently and informally by the search committee in their selection process. Files were later reviewed by this author and fellow search committee member R. N. Carlsen, who codified the findings. Interrater reliability exceeded .95.

Descriptive statistics of the sample were developed for each criteria item based on search committee rankings. A frequency distribution of the sum total of each candidate's score was plotted to discover the range of qualifications in this sample.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated from the search committee's scoring of candidates on the nine criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2
Mean Qualifications of Applicants

Earned doctorate in education.....	MEAN = .817 S.D. = .290
Background in curriculum development.....	MEAN = .439 S.D. = .502
Three years experience in schools.....	MEAN = .805 S.D. = .314
Proficiency in English language.....	MEAN = .634 S.D. = .251
Commitment to research.....	.MEAN = .317 S.D. = .429
Commitment to teaching.....	MEAN = . 707 S.D. = .353
Undergraduate teaching experience.....	MEAN = .695 S.D. = .431
Graduate teaching experience.....	MEAN = .159 S.D. = .361
Positive relationship with college students	MEAN = .524 S.D. = .192

Earned Doctorate

Approximately 82% of the candidates (n=33) who applied for the position had earned their doctorate. Ten were "all but dissertation," and received partial credit (.5) for this item. Two candidates received no credit: One gave no evidence of doctoral work and another had been "ABD" for over five years and gave no evidence of a completion date in the near future. Of the three candidates selected for interviews two had obtained their doctorates within the last three years and the third was expected to finish within the half year.

Curriculum Development

Less than half of the candidates (44%) had a background in curriculum development and received full credit for this item. Twenty-three candidates showed no evidence of specific knowledge in this area and received no credit. Two of the three finalists specialized in curriculum development, one held a specific degree, taught and wrote on the subject; the other was ABD and teaching in that area. The third finalist was involved in writing and planning curricula in the secondary schools.

Experience in Elementary/Secondary Schools

This item fulfills state teaching certification requirements. Twenty-eight candidates (68%) had taught a minimum of three years at the elementary or secondary level. Ten applicants received partial credit for elementary/secondary related activities and three gave no evidence of teaching at that level. All three interviewees had extensive experience at the secondary level; two were social studies teachers and the third taught English.

Proficiency in English Language

Ability in English language was reflected in the letter of application, accompanying research papers or articles (if any) and/or an undergraduate major in English. Only 12 applicants earned full credit on this item for clear, organized, well though-out, prose. Twenty-eight (68%)of the candidates were judged to write

adequately One applicant submitted unfocused letter of application with obvious grammatical and semantic errors and earned no credit. Two of the finalists received full credit for proficiency in the English Language. Both were teaching on the college level, gave evidence of extensive writing, and wrote clear compelling letters of application that individually addressed each criteria item mentioned in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* advertisement. Additionally, they both included unsolicited research papers with their application materials. The third candidate received partial credit for English proficiency due to a tersely worded letter of application and was later requested to submit a research paper.

Commitment to Research

Ten candidates (24%) gave evidence of publication of books or articles in refereed journals. Six others (15%) received partial credit for co-authored articles, articles in press, book reviews or articles written but not yet published. Most applicants (n=25) were not published. Full credit was earned by all three finalists for evidenced of research. All three had published articles in refereed journals and one interviewee had two books in print.

Commitment to Teaching

Over half of the applicants (n=23) were able to demonstrate that they had been involved with teaching over the length of their professional careers. About 34% had been involved in teaching at one time, but not in the recent past. Two applicants gave no evidence of teaching experiences; two others had extensive careers in counseling, rather than teaching. All three of the candidates invited to campus had been cited for their excellence in teaching by students and/or peers.

Undergraduate Teaching Experiences

Twenty-six applicants had experience teaching at the undergraduate college level. An additional five applicants worked as graduate assistants, paper graders, or lab assistants. Ten candidates had no direct or indirect experience with an undergraduate college

population. Two interviewees had some experience teaching undergraduate classes; the third did not.

Graduate Teaching Experience

Six applicants (15%) had taught at the graduate level; one candidate received half credit for conducting a graduate level course in computers for teachers. The overwhelming majority (83%) had no graduate teaching experience. None of the finalists indicated that they had taught graduate courses in their vitaes.

Relationship with College Students

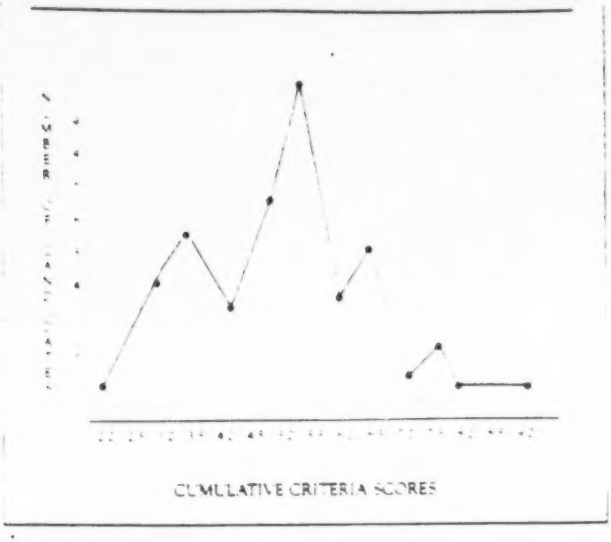
Indications of positive relationships with college students were found in letters of recommendation. Four candidates received full credit for specific references to their excellent rapport with a college population; 35 applicants were give partial credit based on their potential to deal well with this student group. Only two candidates received no credit because their ability to relate to college students was not mentioned by them or their references. Two of the interviewees received full credit for their ability to relate to college students. These two were currently teaching at the college level and had references made regarding their ability to effectively deal with that population. The third interviewee was cited as an excellent secondary teacher with potential to be an outstanding college teacher. Due to the strength of his references, this candidate was given half of a credit for this item.

Range of Qualifications

When individual criteria scores were tabulated, the qualifications of the applicant field ranged from 2.0 to 9.0. The average candidate score was 5.088. The three candidates invited for interviews all ranked within the top third of the sample and scored above 6.5 (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Range of Candidate Qualifications



The bottom third of the sample (n=19), made a weak impression on the search committee. Scores ranged from 2.0 to 4.5. Six of these candidates were ABD and only one was qualified in the area of curriculum development. Of the 11 Ph.D's that applied for the position, only three were qualified in secondary education and curriculum development. Two candidates did not mention Ph.D, level qualifications or a concentration in curriculum.

The middle group, (n=12), with scores from 5.5 to 6.0 had at least half of the qualifications listed in the advertisement, but displayed them in ways that was often difficult to find. Several criteria such as proficiency in English language, ability to deal with college students, and commitment to teaching and research was gleaned from the candidates self statements or from letters of recommendations

If strengths were not obvious in those areas, the search committee, for the most part, did not look beyond the written statement. Perhaps some of this group could have been boosted into the top quarter and become a finalists if they had been more articulate about their qualifications.

The top third of the group, (n=10, from which the three interviewees were selected, very clearly had most of the qualifications for the position. Scores ranged from 6.5 to 9.0. They overwhelmingly addressed the different criteria items in their cover letters and documented their strengths. Vitaes were professional looking and well organized. Recommendations tended to be job specific and outstanding.

Discussion

Although the search committee was asked to evaluate candidates on their ability to meet this criteria, other factors surfaced and clearly came in to play when making the final selections. Armed with check lists of position qualifications, the committee scrutinized each candidate's credentials and selected eight candidates for further consideration. They lobbied within the committee to gain support for their favorites and to seek out additional information on candidates advocated by other committee members.

After much discussion, inquiry, and several phone calls to verify information, three candidates were selected to be interviewed. Although the committee would participate in the interview process, much of what would now occur would be on the candidate's shoulders - qualities like communication, clarity, focus, competence, interpersonal skills and the ability to fill institutional need would have to be demonstrated by the invitee. Additionally, faculty, students, and the Dean would have input on the selection. Regardless on their ranking on the initial screening, they were all on equal footing as invitees.

Thus, while the applications of individual candidates must be initially appealing to attract the favorable attention of at least one committee member, the submission must also be complete and detailed enough to withstand the careful scrutiny of the committee as a whole. Furthermore, each committee member who failed to select a particular applicant now worked to legitimize their initial decision of why they did not initially select the applicant.

Conversely, applicants that were put forth by some and rejected by other committee members where now looked at more closely as to why they were initially recommended.

The candidates who clearly had the advantage were those who responded specifically to the advertisement and made the committee's members job easier both by presenting clearly marked professionally looking documents accompanied by personal letters of application and crisp laser printed copies. Successful candidates had clearly delineated their areas of consideration, their dates of employment, and the dates and institutions of their degrees. Personal letters of recommendation were critical to obtain the committees' support and proved especially important for neophyte candidates attempting to establish their potential for college teaching and research as well as their ability to relate to a college population.

Poor quality in the reproduction of resumes, out of date recommendations, and unspecific cover letters hurt some of the candidates. Committee members wondered if this lack of attention to detail and professional presentation would carry over to the work situation. Also, as committee members had limited time and resources, they were reluctant to dig further after a poor first impression.

The candidate qualities that appeared to be most important in this initial search committee screening were:

1. Earned doctorate in education.
2. Curriculum area specialist.
3. Superior teaching skills
4, Communication skills.

Later in the screening process when the field was narrowed down, other criteria came to have more impact. Now the applicant pool was scrutinized as to:

1. Ability to relate to college students which was found in letters of recommendation or in documentation of previous positive college-level teaching experiences.
2. Undergraduate and graduate teaching ability.
3. Ability to conduct research at the university.

Not to be overlooked was the wide range of credentials that were presented for the same position. Some obvious errors of judgement occurred in the lower level of the sample such as an absence of letters of recommendation or the lack of congruence with the job description. For a large number of applicants, who scores were in the middle range, qualifications were often ubiquitous. Documentation didn't clearly establish their competency in the search committee's mind. The three candidates that were invited for the interviews came from a pool of applicants having scores from 6.5 and above. However, we did not know this until we went back and coded the files and looked at how the applicant pool clustered.

It is reasonable to assume, that any number of these middle candidates with scores from 5 to 6.5 might have been thrust into the cluster for final consideration if they had done several of the following things: Presented a more favorable first impression in terms of application letter, recommendations, and resumes; personalized documentation, clearly articulating their qualifications for the position; and documenting material in a way that the search committee could find it and not have to guess at what qualities were present or absent.

Summary and Recommendations

The results of a recent search committee to hire new faculty found that only one-third of the applicants presented credentials that allowed serious search committee consideration. Although 80% of the applicant pool had attained their Ph.D.'s, only 43% were qualified in curriculum development. Lack of expertise in this area immediately eliminated over half of the applicant pool. In those that were selected for final interviews, personalized letters of submission, updated resumes, and recent recommendations that spoke to the candidate's strength for the position were pivotal in being selected.

The criteria items that seemed to matter most in the initial screening were the overall match with the institution's needs. (Ph.D.,

curriculum specialist, and evidence of teaching experience) In the final selection for candidates to be interviewed, the applicant's potential for prestige (published research and graduate and undergraduate teaching experience) was scrutinized more closely.

There was the general perception that some candidates were more qualified than their submissions indicated and that several candidates could have presented their credentials more effectively. Effort and attention to detail for something as important as acquiring a job, especially with all the implications of relocation, thousands of dollars in potential pay, etc, would seem to indicate that increased expertise in this area would be well worth while. There appears to be a need in higher education for training on how to more effectively compete for a job opening.

As a result of this search committee's findings, the following recommendations are suggested for candidates in higher education:

(1) Apply for positions in which you meet at least half of the criteria. Search committee's don't expect a perfect match, but they do expect that serious applicants meet most of the qualifications.

(2) Demonstrate or document expertise in the area of concentration. Failure to do so may result in immediately being eliminated for consideration.

(3) Clearly articulate qualifications in cover letter, vitae, and letters of recommendation. Faculty search committees are not prone to probe further if applicants qualification are ambiguous.

(4) Present credentials in an organized, professional manner. Better marketing skills may have made the difference for 20% of the candidates in this applicant pool.

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